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# Issues

for  
RHODE ISLAND  
MANAGEMENT

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## **ABSENTEEISM: Missing Employees Mean 100 Million Work Hours Lost!**

Figures released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that in an average week, 2.4 million of the 56.5 million non-farm wage and salary employees who normally worked full time were on unscheduled absence part of the week, for an average of two days. This adds up to 1.4 million absent because of illness, and 1.0 million for miscellaneous personal reasons. That's an increase of some 15 percent in just five years. Unscheduled leave of more than a week went up by about 10 percent in the same period.

### **An Army of Invisible Employees**

It's easy to slide over percentages like the above and dismiss them as "just another set of statistics." But they add up to boxcar-size figures in terms of real workers and lost output: work-hours lost as a result of these short-term absences averaged 43.8 million hours a week, and an additional 59.4 million hours a week is lost from full-week absence. That's a big army of "invisible employees" who are making it more difficult for their co-workers to do their jobs.

### **Translate to "Real Life"**

Translated to "real life," statistics like the above add up to dollars lost right in our departments, as in the following examples:

- A garment manufacturer who was carrying 14 percent more employees than necessary, in order to fill in for absentees — even though, because of work fluctuations, a third of the extra people often didn't have enough work to keep them fully occupied.
- An automobile dealer who found that the cost of absenteeism, when distributed over all of his employees, was running to \$300 per person per year.
- A fabricating plant which, on a similar basis, has a bill of \$140 per year.
- A department store which found its annual absenteeism cost to be \$50,000, or \$110 per employee, when fringe-benefit costs and extra overtime were counted.

This problem of absenteeism costs call for a double-barrelled attack by supervisors in every kind of business, in every kind of operation:

1. A continuing analysis of the causes of absenteeism with every department — and this immediately gets into "people problems."
2. Specific measures and controls to prevent or minimize disruptions caused by unexpected or overly prolonged absences. This calls for sound planning. The following checklist should help.

## **A TEN-POINT ABSENTEEISM CHECK LIST FOR SUPERVISORS**

- ☐ Insist on prompt notification always when someone in your department must be absent unexpectedly.
- ☐ Insist on prior discussions about necessary absences for personal reasons, rather than explanations after the stay-away. In any event, call for real explanations rather than imaginative stories and "phony" excuses.
- ☐ What is the "Blue Monday" situation in your department? Keep a running record of absences on Monday or the day after each holiday, compared with absences on the best-attendance day (which will probably be payday!). The difference is a good indicator of "phony" absenteeism.
- ☐ Avoid crises due to unexpected absences by having standard operating procedures and standard backstop procedures: who is to be kept informed of what detail, who is to pinch-hit for whom.
- ☐ **Be sure to give prompt notification** to other departments that may be affected by delays caused by unexpected absences in your bailiwick.
- ☐ Maintain good departmental and individual absence records. Make periodic checks to see who are the "Absence-proners."
- ☐ Have heart-to-heart discussions with the ones who cause most of your absentee problems. See if there are personal problems on which counsel by you or someone in the Personnel or Health Department can help.
- ☐ Is a group meeting in your department called for? Collect some facts and figures on actual costs of absenteeism to the department and to the state, including related costs as well as direct costs, to drive home the seriousness of the problem.
- ☐ Check your departmental record with that of other departments. Is yours out of line? Where does the basic fault lie? **Turn the mirror on yourself!**
- ☐ Know your employees. Without prying, show an interest in their personal lives. Encourage after-hour discussion of problems that affect attendance and productivity.



# SEXUAL HARASSMENT: PREVENTION IS THE KEY

Jane, a new employee, was the only woman supervisor on the staff. When she returned from a regional conference, she told her supervisor, Steve, about an experience she had had at the conference. She said that Chuck, a supervisor from another division, had touched her in an offensive way while sitting next to her at dinner, and suggested that she come to his hotel room for drinks later. During this exchange, he hinted strongly that her success on the job depended on how "friendly" she turned out to be.

When Jane finished relating the story to Steve, he replied that she must have misinterpreted Chuck's behavior. A few months later, when another out-of-state conference was scheduled, Steve told Jane that she would not be able to go because of "budgetary considerations."

Was Jane a victim of sexual harassment? If so, by whom, and in what way? These and other workplace situations were discussed by participants at an EEO seminar, "Preventing Sexual Harassment," presented by Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations in New York City.

## Harassment in Several Guises

The story illustrates several different forms of sexual harassment, says seminar leader K. C. Wagner, director of the Working Women's Institute, suggesting that the following issues should be considered:

- Offensive touching at a business or government sponsored event is an example of conduct prohibited under the sex bias provisions of Title VII.
- Chuck's suggestion that Jane's success on the job depended on how she responded to his overtures may be an example of "quid pro quo" harassment — an implied promise of a job benefit in return for sexual favors.
- Steve's failure to look into, or even believe, Jane's story could cause major problems for the agency later. As a representative for his agency, Steve was put on notice that the employer should do something about the harassment.
- Not allowing Jane to go to the next conference may be a form of retaliation for her complaint — a practice prohibited by Title VII.

## Investigation Obligation

Managers and supervisors have a legal obligation to investigate and remedy the situation, once a sexual harassment problem is brought to their attention either as a formal complaint or as an informal request for assistance, Wagner says. Even if an employer does not have actual notice of a specific sexual harassment situation, it is not automatically insulated from liability under the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* (1986, 40 FEP Cases 1822).

Rhode Island's policy on sexual harassment was set forth by Executive Order No. 85-13. In it Governor Edward D. DiPrete called upon the State Equal Opportunity Office to be responsible for:

- providing a program of orientation to all State employees inclusive of appropriate information concerning the nature of sexual harassment, methods by which it may be prevented or eliminated, and avenues through which victims may seek assistance;
- upon request, provide an orientation program to all companies doing business in the State of Rhode Island;
- the investigation and resolution of all complaints of sexual harassment.

The Governor also called upon "the heads of each State agency, board, commission and Educational Institution," to be responsible for:

- including in their Affirmative Action Plan and disseminating to all employees, a statement of policy;
- briefing supervisory personnel on the problems and consequences of sexual harassment and their role in taking corrective action;
- to assure that each person in his/her employ attends the sexual harassment orientation presented by the State Equal Opportunity Office.

The Governor further urged "all other constitutional officers . . . to implement similar policies to assure the elimination of sexual harassment."

The State Equal Opportunity Office in turn has prepared an eight step Grievance Procedure to handle sexual harassment complaints,

as well as other complaints of discrimination.

Discipline for those found guilty of sexual harassment may range from reprimand to suspension to termination from State service.

In addition to issuing a strong policy statement against sexual harassment, managers can go a long way toward preventing harassment by:

- Bringing up the issue of sexual harassment at department meetings, before it becomes a problem;
- Expressing strong disapproval of any form of sexual harassment in the workplace, from offensive remarks to obscene posters and calendars.

## INVESTIGATING A SEXUAL HARASSMENT COMPLAINT

In investigating a complaint, managers should act in a way that is both "responsible and non-inflammatory," says the Working Women's Institute, which recommends taking the following steps before considering any remedial or disciplinary action:

- Conduct a formal interview with the employee making the complaint, taking notes on details and possible witnesses.
- Check on the personnel file of the accused harasser for possible previous related incidents;
- Talk to the accused harasser about the situation and the seriousness of sexual harassment, reminding him or her of the state's policy against such behavior.
- Urge the harasser to change his or her behavior immediately, stressing that retaliation against the complaining employee is illegal.

## MANAGERS ARE TALKING ABOUT . . .

### A New Way to Manage Employees

It begins with a simple assumption: Good employees will do things in their employer's best interests, provided they have the resources to do so. Proponents of this new management idea — known as workstyle — say it is an efficient and profitable way to run a business. Although some workstylists spend a lot of money on their employees (building employee gyms, for example) others spend little or no money. Workstyle can mean simply being nice to employees or handing out monthly "Super Person" awards to recognize good job performance. Workstylists insist their employee-oriented style of managing isn't just humanitarian, it affects the bottom line. The cost of not treating employees well is high they say, in terms of "turnover, dissatisfaction, and inefficiency."

### In the Future: a Renaissance for Multitalented Managers

Tomorrow's successful managers will be more in step with Leonardo da Vinci than with the Silicon Valley computer wizards of recent years. The computer revolution has not reduced the generalized abilities of the Renaissance manager to obsolescence, says *U.S. News & World Report*. Tomorrow's managers will need to be skilled financiers and marketers, knowledgeable about new developments in technology, as well as able communicators and leaders. The generalist who has a grasp of new developments and is skilled in dealing with people will have the advantage. "The most important things for a senior level executive is judgment," says Executive Recruiter David Peasback, "and computers are never going to substitute for that."

### Give Them the Bad News and Watch the Results

Many managers approach their duties like a mother hen, shielding employees from the news of unpalatable management decisions or policies. But their good intentions might be causing more harm than good, notes *Office Systems* magazine. Feeling they've been given a whitewash, employees are likely to resent managers for not treating them as equals. Managers who tell their employees "like it is," says *Office Systems*, will reap (1) respect from their employees, (2) flexible employees who can roll with the punches, (3) a more cohesive group who feel they're a part of a team, and (4) support and advice from employees for resolving problems.



**The 22 Biggest Mistakes Managers Make and How to Correct Them** by James K. Van Fleet, Parker Publishing Company, West Nyack, NY.

James K. Van Fleet is a well-known management consultant and lecturer on managerial motivation techniques. Seven of the 22 mistakes referred to in his book have to do with the part of any manager's performance that indicates whether he has the qualities of leadership that justify promotion.

Here are the seven. Stand in front of a mirror and try them on for size:

- Trying to be liked rather than respected. Don't accept favors from your subordinates ... Don't do special favors trying to be liked ... Don't try for popular decisions ... Don't be soft about discipline ... Don't party or socialize with subordinates ... Have a sense of humor.
- Failing to ask subordinates for their advice and help. Make them feel a problem is their problem too ... Encourage individual thinking ... Make it easy for them to communicate their ideas to you ... Follow through on their ideas.
- Failing to develop a sense of responsibility in subordinates. Allow freedom of expression ... Give each person a chance to learn his superior's job ... When you give responsibility, give authority, too ... Hold subordinates accountable for results.
- Emphasizing rules rather than skill. Give a person a job to do — then let the person do it ... Let the employee improve his/her own job methods.
- Failing to keep criticism constructive. When something goes wrong, do you tend to assume who's at fault? ... Do you do your best to get all the facts first? ... Do you control your temper? ... Do you praise before you criticize? ... Do you listen to the other side of the story? ... Do you allow a person to retain his or her dignity? ... Do you suggest steps to prevent recurrence of the mistake? ... Do you forgive and forget?
- Not paying attention to employee gripes and complaints. (1) Make it easy for them to come to you. (2) Get rid of red tape. (3) Explain the grievance machinery. (4) Help a person voice his own complaint. (5) Always grant a hearing. (6) Practice patience. (7) Ask a complainer what (s)he wants to do. (8) Don't render a hasty or biased judgment. (9) Get all the facts. (10) Let the complainer know what your decision is. (11) Double-check your results. (12) Be concerned.
- Failure to keep people informed. Let people know where they stand with you ... Praise people properly ... Let your close assistants in on your plans at an early stage ... Let people know as early as possible of any changes that will affect them ... Let them know of changes that will not affect them, about which they may worry.

### ISSUES

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## Do women miss work more than men?

"The absenteeism statistics are not kind to women's lib," remarked a vice president for industrial relations of a large company.

True, data from the monthly Current Population Survey of the Bureau of the Census, analyzed by Janice Neipert Hedges, economist in the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Division of Economic Studies, do show rates of unscheduled absence for women to be about 33 percent higher than those for men. But let's look beneath the surface.

### Putting the facts into perspective

"Factors other than sex must be considered," comments Ms. Hedges. "Women are more likely to be new hires, and more likely to be employed in the lower skilled, lower paid occupations — two factors associated with relatively high rates of absence. Sex differences in absence rates narrow when comparisons are made within a particular occupation group, even though within the group men tend to occupy the better paying jobs."

### Favorable records

Esther E. Espenshade, supervisor, Division of Statistics, Programs, and Publications, Illinois Department of Labor, has pointed out that women workers have favorable records of attendance and labor turnover when compared with men employed at similar job levels and under similar circumstances. Says she:

"Impartially collected statistics on absenteeism and labor turnover indicate that the skill level of the job, the age of the worker, the worker's length of service with the employer, and the worker's job stability, all provide better clues to understanding differences in work performances as to absenteeism/turnover than whether the worker is a man or a woman. Further reduction in the amount of absenteeism of women compared with men is to be expected as improved medical and health care facilities become available, and more widespread day care centers for children are established."

### SYBIL SERVICE SAYS ...



There's no limit to the amount of good people can do if they don't care who gets the credit.

A person must be big enough to admit mistakes, smart enough to profit by them, and strong enough to correct them.



# COMMUNICATIONS: An Essential Tool of Management

Part VII — the closing article in a seven part series for public service managers on effectively communicating with employees. *Synopsis of Part VI — (Issues, January 1988). Part VI covered the importance of preparing the new employee for the job by publicizing employee benefits, and communicating agency policies and rules. It explored ways to effectively communicate with employees, and hints on how to correct misinformation and dispel rumors were given.*

## Open up Communications with Employees and Provide Opportunities for Participative Management —

Because of the infinite variety of management styles and the nature of organizational climates, it's difficult to suggest quick cures that will be effective in all situations. Many are just starting to explore the outer space of participative management. Listed below are not so much new concepts but rather variations and adaptations of programs that have met with success.

- Make certain any employee can see a member of the personnel staff or a higher official without having to get clearance from his own supervisor.
- Provide channels for rank-and-file employees to develop suggestions and recommend implementation on how to improve the organizational structure.
- Make sure every suggestion (usable or not) gets a response.
- Have a procedure to handle questions, respond to grievances by phone.
- Encourage representatives of minorities and women's groups to review your agency's equal opportunity policies.
- Try to reduce barriers associated with rank, traditional supervisor-subordinate relationships.
- Arrange breakfast meetings of new employees with a key manager or staff official.
- Sponsor periodic seminars, conducted by managers on a rotating basis; let employees choose sessions they wish to attend, depending on their special interests.
- Don't permit staffers or supervisors to ridicule or belittle employees' comments or suggestions made during open meetings or rap sessions.
- Hold group meetings with 4 or 5 employees at a time with a representative of management; the manager sits back and lets employees do the talking, express ideas on what they think should be accomplished.

- Arrange for top management to hold informal luncheon meetings with all new recruits to exchange information and answer questions. One employee is assigned responsibility to follow up closely and provide advice and counsel to all new employees.

- Encourage supervisors to compliment (or, when necessary, give constructive criticism) to their work groups as a unit.

- Use performance appraisals as an occasion for dialogue between supervisors and subordinates on a one-to-one basis; this provides meaningful opportunity for open communication.

- Set up a council of supervisors and middle managers (but no top management) to recommend training, communications programs.

- Set up a management advisory group, including supervisory and non-supervisory people appointed on a rotating basis.

- Use team building approach, involving people in different functions jointly making decisions on future plans. Hold departmental work team meetings to get more employees involved in decision-making. Involve employees working on related projects, cutting across departmental lines where appropriate.

## Why It's Important to Hold Meetings —

No "communication tool kit" is complete without a tool that provides for upward communications — the flow of employees' opinions, ideas, and questions to management.

The management-employee meeting is essentially such a tool. When planned as a two-way group conversation, a meeting can help management encourage and evaluate employees' responses in ways that are not usually possible with any other medium.

- Spontaneous verbal comments. Employees' on-the-spot remarks about an idea frequently reveal their true opinions better than their written comments. One reason: After thinking it over, many employees will be reluctant to put any criticism in writing.
- Visual clues. Gestures and facial expressions, visible only in face-to-face conversation, can help provide useful clues to the attitudes underlying an employee's remarks or questions.

- Focus of questions. If properly encouraged, more employees are likely to submit questions at a meeting than through other upward channels. This larger sample of questions will help management pinpoint areas where most employees probably need additional information or explanation.

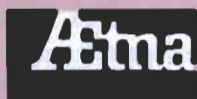
- Audience response. The overall reaction of the employee audience — nods, smiles, murmurs, etc. — to individuals' comments can help management determine what the majority of listeners think about the topic under discussion.

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State employees can save for the future by participating in the deferred compensation program, a way of putting money aside without having to pay taxes on it, or the income it earns, until retirement when your tax rate is usually lower. Managers can assist their employees in learning more about deferred compensation by showing them an audio-visual presentation that clearly explains the deferred compensation program. To arrange to show this slide-tape production, call the Employee Benefits Section, Office of Personnel Administration at 277-3160.

This newsletter is sponsored by the state's three carriers of the deferred compensation plan.



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